

Leadership Wisdom

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The purpose of this article is to share some leadership insights that I have discovered during my career as an Army Medical Department (AMEDD) leader. While this is not an exhaustive treatise on the vast subject of leadership, it is a crisp list of 10 practical tidbits that I learned for myself through leadership research and practice, and from observing other skilled leaders. My hope is that leaders of all kinds, young and old, new and seasoned, will find these tips both practical and beneficial, and pass them on to others.

START WITH LEADING YOURSELF

Although it may appear obvious, it is worth clearly stating that in order to effectively lead others, you must ultimately begin with properly leading yourself. The very first step in doing this is ensuring that you have a balanced, healthy degree of self-discipline; this includes your conduct both on and off duty. Any reckless behavior in your personal life will most certainly detract from your professionalism as a leader. In the end, if you cannot lead yourself, both in and out of uniform, you will be unable to effectively lead others. Next, you must develop and maintain a program of self-development. To me, self-development is one of the 4 essential pillars of Army leader development, along with professional schooling (both military and civilian), developmental assignments, and mentoring from others. For me, I have found it best to establish a set time to carve out some uninterrupted period for my personal self-development (I have been asked many times how I find the time to do this; I respond that I do not find the time to do this, I make the time to do this!). For some of my assignments, this occurred early in the morning before I began the day's duties. For other jobs, I took time during the weekends to work on my own professional growth. Currently, I use the time that I commute by train to read and reflect on my own personal leadership development. Luckily, I am able to "tune out" the background noise of the multiple conversations around me and make the most use of this precious time for my personal and professional benefit. Another useful tip is to always carry along something of a professional nature to read (such as a book or an article) when you go to appointments. As it

turns out, I spend considerable time each week waiting for appointments or meetings to begin. By bringing along professional development reading materials, I can readily capitalize on this otherwise "dead time" for brief, focused self-development.

BE A GOOD FOLLOWER

After being able to lead yourself, the most important thing for a leader is to be a good follower. Each of us, whether we are a newly commissioned officer or a senior AMEDD leader, has a boss. Given that, it is incumbent upon all of us to always strive to be good subordinates. We can best do that by understanding our leaders one and two echelons above us, and do our utmost to make them successful. This includes using our time with our raters and senior raters to get a better sense of who these officers are and what are their leadership preferences. Therefore, the counseling which is the centerpiece of the officer evaluation system is also a two-way dialogue that lets us learn about those we follow and how we can best support them. Other ways to be a good follower is to keep our leaders informed about what we are doing, not going behind their backs to accomplish the mission, letting them know what is going right and what is going wrong, and never undermining their authority by criticizing or disparaging their orders or their leadership in public or in private.

CHANGE CAN BE THE ILLUSION OF PROGRESS

The central premise of Darwin's seminal work, *The Origin of Species*,¹ is that the key to survival in biological evolution is the ability of a species to adapt. A species that does not adapt perishes, ultimately becoming extinct. The same can be said of the Army. When I first came in the Army, two and a half decades ago, I immediately struck by a tremendous cultural inertia that resisted critical change. Procedures were institutionalized and were out of step with the then current reality and external forces demanding that the Army evolve. Now, sadly I fear the opposite may have become true. With all of the dramatic and widespread change that I see all around me, I often wonder if perhaps the pendulum has shifted too far the other way

and we have gone from change averse to change addicted. Now, I am not saying that we should never change things; however, we need to make sure we truly understand the status quo and determine if the situation has truly changed and warrants adaptation to ensure our continued effectiveness. That is why I make it a practice when I take on a new assignment or assume a new duty position, I hold off making any substantial changes for a set period of time (In my current assignment, I did not make any major changes for a period of 6 months). Instead, I focus on learning my new job and its current intricacies and nuances to be sure that I thoroughly understand it. Then, I discover my boss's intent, and in what direction he or she intends to lead. Combining this with a realistic appraisal of the current situation and where I want to head, puts me in a much better position to properly design and effectively implement any needed, but measured change.

DON'T DROP THE GLASS BALLS

An excellent metaphor for leadership is juggling. All of us have more on our plates than we can possibly hope to accomplish; that's just the way it is. We cannot ever hope to do it all. Each day we start with a finite, known list of tasks that we strive to complete before we go home for the day. Unfortunately, throughout the day, we receive more and more tasks. I liken this situation to juggling balls. Some of the balls we juggle are what I designate as "tennis balls." They are things that we or others want done but are not really critical. So, if you drop them (don't do them or do them in time), they bounce on the floor and do not break (that is, there are no serious consequences). People may get angry or disappointed if we drop them, but it is not a disaster if we do so. Often, you can pick the tennis balls up later and resume juggling them with no serious penalty, personal or professional. Conversely, some balls I label as "glass balls;" these are things that are important and there will be real and serious consequences if we drop them; they will metaphorically "shatter" if dropped. Examples of glass balls include most tasks given to us by our superiors. Other examples of glass balls are compliance with Army regulations or command policies. Some not-so-obvious glass balls include relaxing, spending quality time with our families, pursuing our treasured hobbies, and maintaining our own personal health, fitness, and well-being.

Each of us has a certain limit in the number of balls we can actually juggle at any given time. This juggling limit also changes from day to day and can be affected by how well rested we are and whether or not we are sick. To further complicate things, some of the balls that we juggle may start out as either glass balls or tennis balls, and they may then unexpectedly change into to the other type of ball in midair. So, we need to be constantly evaluating all of the many balls we are currently juggling, determining whether or not they are made of glass or not, and assessing new balls that others throw to us to determine if we need to attempt to juggling them or let them fall to the floor (and hopefully they will bounce). Of course, one of the most effective ways to resolve this dilemma is to delegate the juggling of some of these balls to others so that they can begin handling them instead of us. However, we must be mindful and be sure not to give our subordinates too many balls to juggle, and we must always keep track of the glass balls to be sure that they remain in the air and are not lying behind us in shattered pieces on the floor.

LEAD FROM THE FRONT

This advice has been a long time leadership maxim. Your Soldiers need to see you out and among them. They need to know that you are with them and out front leading the way. This is the military version of "Management by Walking Around" cited in the classic leadership book, *In Search of Excellence*.² In a deployed setting, this means leaving your command post and going out to where the danger is. In the hospital setting, this means making the rounds to where the day-to-day activities are occurring, such as surgeries, procedures, appointments, etc. When a major problem or crisis arises, you should go directly to the scene, determine first-hand what is happening, and personally take charge. Once you have a handle on what is happening, you can then confidently step back and delegate others to implement your solutions. A leader who only leads from the rear is at best operationally blind with no real situational awareness, or at worst becomes loathed and resented by those whom he or she leads.

NEVER LEAD ANGRILY

Each of us is human. When things go wrong or people do not do what we want them to, we can get angry. That being said, it is imperative that, as leaders, we do

not lose our tempers. For me, when something happens that sets me off, I seek to immediately disengage from the situation so I can “blow my stack” quietly and in private. This can be accomplished by asking others to leave the room or by retreating into your office and closing the door (please note that yelling behind closed doors does not count). In my opinion, leaders that rant and rave in front of their subordinates are just bad leaders, plain and simple. I have no tolerance or respect whatsoever for these most toxic of leaders. The higher the rank, the more this is true. Senior leaders must master the vital skill of defusing their anger and maintaining their composure. Never make important decisions, give an order, counsel a subordinate, leave a voicemail message, or send a text or an email when you are angry. Once you do, you can never take it back and the results can be disastrous, even career ending. You need to experience your feelings, but not let them hijack your reason and distort your judgment. I know for me this is one of the most difficult things to do, and I am not always successful in doing so, even despite my best efforts.

USE THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE RIGHT JOB

My father is the ultimate “Mr. Fix-It,” and he taught me from a very young age to always use the right tool for the right job. This means knowing both your tools and the problem that you are trying to fix. Interestingly enough, effective leadership is like a toolbox. It is filled with many tools that a leader can use to motivate his or her followers to accomplish the mission: encouraging words, rewards, inspirational quotes or examples, recognition, shame, and the threat of punishment (if used both sparingly and gingerly), to name but a few. Unfortunately, there is not only one way to lead Soldiers, civilians, and contractors. Before you reach for a leadership tool, you need to know your subordinates and the proper leadership tool which is needed for that individual at that time. Some subordinates need to be clearly told what is expected of them and exactly how they should complete their duties. Others need to only be told to “take that hill” and they will make it happen. While everyone needs praise and encouragement, some individuals need more of it. Nonperformers need to be confronted early and in private when they are not performing properly, and continually held to task and to standard. In the end, all of this really boils down getting to genuinely know your people and how they each need to be lead. Hence, leadership is indeed very personal.

CHECK WITH NAPOLEON’S CORPORAL

The French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte had a corporal who shined his boots and helped maintain his uniforms. As the story goes, this corporal was always present when Napoleon met with his general staff. Before any major campaign decisions, the Emperor would turn to his corporal and ask what the man thought of the plan currently on the table. If the corporal understood the tactic and thought it made sense, Napoleon implemented the strategy; if he did not, Napoleon sent the staff back to the drawing board. Used properly and judiciously, I think this is invaluable leadership advice. While I do not vet all of my leadership decisions through my own Napoleon’s Corporal, I have used this method with large, complex, and very important matters. I have also seen one former Army Surgeon General use another version of this approach by asking the opinion of the most junior Soldier present in the room (someone other than the general’s aide) as a sanity check on a given course of action being proposed.

BELIEVE IN YOUR SUBORDINATES

In my opinion, one the best kept secrets to being a highly successful leader is to truly and deeply believe in your subordinates. Regrettably, I have seen leaders who were wary or distrustful of their subordinates, and consequently became doomed to a career of micromanagement, or became overwhelmed and paralyzed by their inability to delegate. While holding too tightly to the leadership reins may work for a junior leader early on in his or her career, eventually it becomes impossible for one to succeed, except through one’s subordinates. Fortunately for us leaders, there is a wonderful phenomenon called the Pygmalion Effect. Pygmalion was a sculptor in ancient Greek Mythology who falls in love with a female statue that he carves out of ivory. His vision of her literally brings her to life from within the ivory block. In the Pygmalion Effect, people literally become what we expect them to be. In education, this is also referred to as the Rosenthal Effect, where student achievement is directly related to the teacher’s a priori expectation of how the students will perform. Luckily for those of us who lead, this phenomenon applies to those being led, they tend to rise or fall based upon our opinions of them, expressed or unexpressed. Soldiers who sense that their leadership has no confidence in them or does not trust them, will act accordingly. Conversely,

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Soldiers who feel that their leadership believes in them and trusts them will often exceed the expectations of their leaders, and can move mountains.

MINE THE DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

I end this essay on leadership with what I think is one of the most important bits of advice for leaders, passionately embrace mentorship. As leaders we have a sacred obligation to develop our subordinates and it is one of our greatest responsibilities as commanders, raters, and supervisors. We must make it our ongoing mission to assess the Soldiers we lead and discover those with the greatest potential, the diamonds in the rough. Once we identify them, we must make the time to mentor and groom these future senior leaders to assume the mantles of leadership years or decades down the road. As we all know, the Army grows its leaders from within. Hence, the future senior leaders of our Army Medical Department are our lieutenants and captains of today. Part of effective talent management is nurturing these rising stars so that we retain them and help them to grow into the future leaders that they are destined to become, and our Army will one day so desperately need.

SUMMARY

Becoming a good leader starts with effectively leading yourself. Good leadership flows from good followership. While leaders need to be adaptive, they need to make sure that change is actually necessary and not merely the illusion of progress. Effective

juggling of leadership responsibilities requires identifying the glass balls and making sure that they do not drop.

Leaders need to be visible and be out front, especially when things get rough or when they are the most perilous. Anger should never be allowed to reign and cloud a leader's judgment. Leadership is not "one size fits all," those being led are unique and, consequently, different approaches will be necessary to properly motivate followers. When considering important leadership decisions, it is advisable to seek out your own Napoleon's Corporal to be sure that your plan is sound and those who will implement it do in fact fully understand it. Genuine belief in your Soldiers is the most powerful and lasting thing that you can express as a leader. Lastly, mentoring is a solemn responsibility of leaders that must never be eclipsed by the many literal and figurative battles of the day.

REFERENCES

1. Darwin C. *The Origin of Species*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books; 1968.
2. Peters TJ, Waterman RH Jr. *In Search of Excellence*. New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc; 1984.

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